JORGE LUIS BORGES

The Library of Babel and Other Stories

-->

Table of contents

THE DURATION OF HELL

THE REJECTED SORCERER

THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

THE BABYLONIAN LOTTERY

THE CIRCULAR RUINS

THE CARD-TRICK (verse)

A PATIO (verse)

SOURCES

THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

AND OTHER STORIES

by

JORGE LUIS BORGES

This eBook is published by
© VintReads - 2017
www.vintreads.com

THE DURATION OF HELL

aka La Duración del Infierno

Hell—a speculation that has become weary with the years. Preachers themselves ignore it, perhaps because they've been abandoned by the poor, but serviceable, human allusion that the ecclesiastical fires of the Holy Office had in this world: a temporal torment no doubt, but not unworthy within terrestrial limitations of being a metaphor for an immortal, perfect pain without destruction, which the heirs of the divine wrath will know forever. Whether this hypothesis is satisfactory or not, it is unarguable that there is a general lassitude in the propaganda of this institution. (Let no one jump to conclusions: the term propaganda is not of commercial origin, but catholic; it is a meeting of cardinals.) In the second century, the Carthaginian Tertullian could imagine Hell and foresee its operation in this discourse:

" Do spectacles please you? then expect a greater one, the Final Judgment. What wonder will I experience, what laughter, what celebration, what joy, when I see so many

arrogant kings and lying gods agonizing in the very lowest prison of darkness; so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, melting in fires more fierce than the ones they ever incinerated for Christians; so many grave philosophers shaming themselves in the red flames with their illusory auditors; so many acclaimed poets trembling not before the tribunal of Midas, but of Christ; so many actors of tragedy more eloquent now in the manifestation of so genuine a torment... (De spectaculis, 30; citation and version from Gibbon.)

Dante himself, who in his great task to foresee in anecdotal mode some decisions of the Divine Justice concerning northern Italy, does not display an equal enthusiasm. The literary infernos of Quevedo—mere comedic opportunities for anachronisms—and of Torres Villaroel—mere opportunity for metaphors—only prove the growing abuse of the dogma. The decadence of Hell is in them almost similar to Baudelaire's, who was so skeptical of the imperishable torments that he pretends to adore them. (A significant etymology derives the innocuous French verb géner from the powerful Scriptural word gehnna.)

I now consider Hell. The nominal but thoughtless article from Diccionario enciclopédico hispano-americano is useful reading, not for its dispirited news or for its frightening ecclesiastical theology, but for the

perplexity evident in its pages. It begins by observing that the notion of hell does not belong exclusively to the catholic church, a precaution whose intrinsic meaning is: “Let not the masons say that the Church introduced those brutalities”; but it constantly reminds us that Hell is dogma, and it adds with urgency:

“ It is to the unfading glory of Christianity that it attracts all the truths it finds dispersed in false religions.” Whether Hell is a fact of natural religion or simply of revealed religion, for me no other topic of theology is as fascinating and powerful. I am not referring to the simplistic mythology of dung, roasters, fire and tongs, which has been growing at the root and which all the writers have been repeating to the dishonor of their imagination and their decency [1]. I am speaking of the strict notion—a place of eternal punishment for the wicked—which constitutes the dogma without other obligations to place it in loco reali, in a precise space, and a beatorum sede distincto, a different place from that which the elect inhabit. To imagine the contrary would be sinister. In the fiftieth chapter of his History, Gibbon attempts to remove Hell’s wonder and writes that the two vulgar ingredients of fire and darkness are sufficient to create a sensation of pain that can be aggravated infinitely by the idea of duration without end. This unhappy objection proves, perhaps, that the creation of infernos is easy, but it does not mitigate the admirable

terror of its invention. The attribute of eternity is horrifying. Continuity—the fact that the divine persecution lacks intervals, that in Hell there is no rest—is even more so, but imagining it is impossible. The eternity of the punishment is what is under dispute.

There are two important and wonderful arguments to invalidate its eternity. The oldest is the one concerning conditional immortality or annihilation. Immortality, argues this comprehensive reasoning, is not an attribute of fallen human nature, it is a gift of God in Christ. It cannot be mobilized, therefore, against the same individual upon whom it is bestowed. It is not a curse, it is a gift. Whoever is worthy of it deserves heaven; whoever is unworthy of receiving it, dies in death, as Bunyan wrote, dies without rest. Hell, according to this pious theory, is the blasphemous human name for oblivion from God. One of its propagators was Whately, the author of that famous unforgettable pamphlet: Historic Doubts relative to Napoleon Bonaparte.

A more curious speculation is the one presented by the evangelical theologian Rothe, in 1869. His argument—ennobled by the secret mercy of denying the infinite punishment of the condemned—observes that to make punishment eternal is to make Evil eternal. God, he affirms, cannot will that eternity for His universe. He insists on the scandal of supposing that sinful man and the devil can mock God's benevolent intentions forever.

(Theology teaches that the creation of the world is a work of love. The term predestination, in theology, refers to predestination to glory; depravation is merely the opposite, it is a non-election translated into infernal punishment, but it does not constitute a special act of divine grace.) He advocates, then, a declining, waning life for reprobates. He envisions them loitering in the edges of Creation and the emptiness of infinite space, maintaining themselves with scraps of life. He concludes: "Just as demons are unconditionally removed from God and are his unconditional enemies, their activity is against the kingdom of God and is organized into a diabolical kingdom, which must naturally elect a leader. The head of that demoniacal government—the Devil—must be imagined as changing. The individuals that assume the throne of that kingdom succumb to the phantasm of their being, but are renewed within the diabolical lineage" (Dogmatik, 1,248).

I arrive at the most unlikely part of my task: the reasons elaborated by humanity in favor of the eternity of Hell. I will summarize them in order of increasing significance. The first is of a punitive nature: it postulates that the fear of punishment resides precisely in its eternal aspect and that to question this invalidates the efficacy of the dogma and is like playing games with the devil. This is an argument made by police-types and doesn't deserve a refutation. The second one is written: The punishment

must be infinite because so is the sin of attacking the majesty of the Lord who is an infinite Being. It has been observed that this demonstration proves so much that we may infer it proves nothing: it proves there is no venial sin, all faults are unpardonable. I would add that this is a case of scholastic frivolity and that its trap lies in the plurality of meanings of the term infinite, which when applied to the Lord means unconditional, to punishment it means unceasing, and to sin nothing that I understand. Besides, to argue that a sin is infinite because it assails God who is an infinite Being, is like arguing that it is holy because God is, or like thinking that all injuries against a tiger have to be striped.

Now I deal with the burden of the third argument, the only one. Perhaps it is written in this manner: Heaven and Hell are eternal because the dignity of free will demands it; either our deeds are eternal or the "I" is a delusion. The virtue of this reasoning is not logic, it is much more; it is entirely dramatic. It imposes on us a terrible game, it dispenses on us the atrocious right of damning ourselves, of insisting on evil, of rejecting the operations of grace, of being fuel for the fire that never ends, of causing God to fail in our destiny, of being ghostly bodies in eternity and detestabile cum cacodaemonibus consortium. "Your destiny is real," it tells us, "eternal condemnation and eternal salvation are in your hands; this responsibility is your honor." This

sentiment is similar to Bunyan's: "God did not play in tempting me; neither did I play, when I sunk as into the bottomless pit, when the pangs of hell caught hold upon me; wherefore I may not play in relating them..." (Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners; The Preface).

I believe that in our unthinkable destiny, in which infamies rule like a carnal pain, every bizarre thing is possible, even the perpetuity of a Hell, but also that it is irreligious to believe in it.

POSTSCRIPT

On this merely factual page I can also relate a dream. I dreamed that I awoke from another dream—populated with cataclysms and tumults—and that I awoke into an unrecognizable room. It grew clear: a general small light defined the foot of the metal bedframe, the standard chair, the closed door and window, the clear table. I thought with fear, "Where am I?" and intuited that I didn't know. I thought, "Who am I?" and couldn't recognize myself. Fear grew within me. I thought: This disconsolate vigil is Hell, this vigil without destiny will be my eternity. Then I really awoke: trembling.

[1]: Nonetheless, the amateur of hells will do well not to ignore these honorable infractions: the sabian hell, whose

four superimposed vestibules admit tiny streams of dirty water on the floor, but whose principal habitation is dilapidated, dusty, and empty; the hell of Swedenborg, whose murkiness is not perceived by the condemned who have rejected heaven; the hell of Bernard Shaw (Man and Superman, pages 86-137), which vainly distracts eternity with the artifices of luxury, art, erotica and fame.

THE REJECTED SORCERER

aka El Brujo Postergado

In Santiago there once was a dean who had a consuming desire to learn the art of magic. He heard that Don Illan of Toledo was more versed in it than anyone else, so he set out for Toledo to find him.

The day that he arrived he went directly to Don Illan's house and found him reading a book in a room set apart from his home. The latter received him with good will and bade him put aside the motive of his visit until after eating. He showed Him to pleasant quarters and told him that he was very pleased by his arrival. After the meal, the dean disclosed to him the reason for his visit and requested that he instruct him in the science of magic. Don Illan told him he had divined that he was a dean, a man of good position and good fortune, but that he feared that afterward he would be forgotten by him. The dean gave his promise and his assurance that he would never forget the favor, and that he would be always at his

service. With the matter now arranged, Don Illan explained that the magic arts could be learned only in a remote place, and. taking him by the hand, led him to an adjoining room on the floor of which there was a large iron ring. He then told the servant girl to prepare partridges for supper, but not to put them on to roast until he so requested. Between, them the two men pulled up on the iron ring and descended so far along a carved stone stairway that it seemed to the dean that the very river bed of the River Tajo must be over their heads. At the foot of the stairway there was a cell and then a library and then a sort of study containing instruments of magic. They began to go through the books, and were engaged in this, when two men entered with a letter for the dean, written by his uncle the bishop, who made it known to him that he was very sick and that he should not delay in coming if he wished to find him alive.

This news greatly annoyed the dean, on the one hand because of the suffering of his uncle, and on the other because it meant interrupting his studies. He chose to write his apologies which he sent to the bishop. Three days later some men in mourning arrived, carrying other letters for the dean in which it was learned that the bishop had died, that a successor was being elected, and that it was hoped through the grace of God that the dean himself would be elected. They said also that he should

not trouble himself to come, since it seemed preferable that he be elected in *absentia* .

Ten days later there arrived two pages in rich dress who threw themselves at his feet and kissed his hand, and greeted him as bishop. When Don Illan saw these things» he approached the new prelate with great joy and told him that he praised God that such good news should have come to his house. Then he requested the vacant deanship for one of his sons. The bishop made it known to him that he had reserved the deanship for his own brother, but that he had decided still to treat him favorably, and that they should depart together for Santiago.

The three went to Santiago, where they were received with honors. Six months later the bishop received messengers from the Pope who was offering him the archbishopric of Tolosa, leaving in his hands the naming of his successor. When Don Illan heard of this, he reminded him of the former promise and requested the title for his son. The archbishop made it known to him that he had reserved the bishopric for his own uncle, his father's brother, but that he had decided still to treat him favorably and that they should depart together for Tolosa. Don Illan had no choice but to accept.

The three went to Tolosa where they were received with honors and masses. Two years later, the archbishop

received messengers from the Pope who was offering him the office of cardinal, leaving in his hands the naming of his successor. When Don Illan heard of this, he reminded him of the former promise and requested the title for his son. The Cardinal made it known to him that he had reserved the archbishopric for his own uncle, his mother's brother, but that he had decided still to treat him favorably and that they should depart together for Rome. The three went to Rome where they were received with honors, masses, and processions. Four years later the Pope died and our cardinal was elected to the papacy by the others. When Don Illan heard of this he kissed the feet of His Holiness, reminded him of the former promise and requested the cardinalship for his son. The Pope threatened him with imprisonment, saying to him that he knew quite well that he was nothing more than a sorcerer and that in Toledo he had been a professor of magic arts. The unhappy Don Illan said that he was going to return to Spain, and he asked him for something to eat along the road. The Pope refused the request. Then Don Illan (whose face strangely had become younger) said in a firm voice:

" Well, then, I'll have to eat the partridges I ordered for tonight."

The servant girl appeared and Don Illan told her to put them on to roast. With these words, the Pope found

himself in the subterranean cell in Toledo, nothing more than dean of Santiago, and so ashamed of his ingratitude that he tried not even to apologize. Don Illan said that this trial was sufficient, denied him his share in the partridges and accompanied him to the street where he wished him a pleasant trip and dismissed him with great courtesy.

THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

By this art you may contemplate the variation of the 23 letters...

— THE ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY, *Part 2, Sect. II, Mem. IV.*

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps an infinite, number of hexagonal galleries, with enormous ventilation shafts in the middle, encircled by very low railings. From any hexagon the upper or lower stories are visible, interminably. The distribution of the galleries is invariable. Twenty shelves— five long shelves per side— cover all sides except two; their height, which is that of each floor, scarcely exceeds that of an average librarian. One of the free sides gives upon a narrow entrance way, which leads to another gallery, identical to the first and to all the others. To the left and to the right of the entrance way are two miniature rooms. One allows standing room for sleeping; the other, the satisfaction of fecal

necessities. Through this section passes the spiral staircase, which plunges down into the abyss and rises up to the heights. In the entrance way hangs a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. People are in the habit of inferring from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that the polished surfaces feign and promise infinity...

Light comes from some spherical fruits called by the name of lamps. There are two, running transversally, in each hexagon. The light they emit is insufficient, incessant.

Like all men of the Library, I have travelled in my youth. I have journeyed in search of a book, perhaps of the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can scarcely decipher what I write, I am preparing to die a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born. Once dead, there will not lack pious hands to hurl me over the banister; my sepulchre shall be the unfathomable air: my body will sink lengthily and will corrupt and dissolve in the wind engendered by the fall, which is infinite. I affirm that the Library is interminable. The idealists argue that the hexagonal halls are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space. They contend that a triangular or pentagonal hall is inconceivable. (The mystics claim that to them ecstasy reveals a round

chamber containing a great book with a continuous back circling the walls of the room; but their testimony is suspect; their words, obscure. That cyclical book is God.) Let it suffice me, for the time being, to repeat the classic dictum: *The Library is a sphere whose consummate centre is any hexagon, and whose circumference is inaccessible.*

Five shelves correspond to each one of the walls of each hexagon; each shelf contains thirty-two books of a uniform format; each book is made up of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines; each line, of some eighty black letters. There are also letters on the spine of each book; these letters do not indicate or prefigure what the pages will say. I know that such a lack of relevance, at one time, seemed mysterious. Before summarising the solution (whose disclosure, despite its tragic implications, is perhaps the capital fact of this history), I want to recall certain axioms.

The first: The Library exists *ab aeterno.* No reasonable mind can doubt this truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world. Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the work of chance or of malevolent demiurges; the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatic volumes, of indefatigable ladders for the voyager, and of privies for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god. In order to perceive the distance which exists between the divine and the human,

it is enough to compare the rude tremulous symbols which my fallible hand scribbles on the end pages of a book with the organic letters inside: exact, delicate, intensely black, inimitably symmetric.

The second: *The number of orthographic symbols is twenty-five.* This bit of evidence permitted the formulation, three hundred years ago, of a general theory of the Library and the satisfactory resolution of the problem which no conjecture had yet made clear: the formless and chaotic nature of almost all books. One of these books, which my father saw in a hexagon of the circuit number fifteen ninety-four, was composed of the letters MCV perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another, very much consulted in this zone, is a mere labyrinth of letters, but on the next-to-the-last page, one may read *O Time your pyramids.* As is well known: for one reasonable line or one straightforward note there are leagues of insensate cacophony, of verbal farragos and incoherencies. (I know of a wild region whose librarians repudiate the vain superstitious custom of seeking any sense in books and compare it to looking for meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of one's hands. ... They admit that the inventors of writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but they maintain that this application is accidental and that books in themselves

mean nothing. This opinion—we shall see—is not altogether false.)

For a long time it was believed that these impenetrable books belonged to past or remote languages. It is true that the most ancient men, the first librarians, made use of a language quite different from the one we speak today; it is true that some miles to the right the language is dialectical and that ninety stories up it is incomprehensible. All this, I repeat, is true, but four hundred and ten pages of unvarying MCVs do not correspond to any language, however dialectical or rudimentary it might be. Some librarians insinuated that each letter could influence the next, and that the value of MCV on the third line of page 71 was not the same as that of the same series in another position on another page; but this vague thesis did not prosper. Still other men thought in terms of cryptographs; this conjecture has come to be universally accepted, though not in the sense in which it was formulated by its inventors.

Five hundred years ago, the chief of an upper hexagon [2] came upon a book as confusing as all the rest but which contained nearly two pages of homogenous lines. He showed his find to an ambulant decipherer, who told him the lines were written in Portuguese. Others told him they were in Yiddish. In less than a century the nature of the language was finally established: it was a Samoyed-

Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabic inflections. The contents were also deciphered: notions of combinational analysis, illustrated by examples of variations with unlimited repetition. These examples made it possible for a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, however diverse, are made up of uniform elements: the period, the comma, the space, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also adduced a circumstance confirmed by all travellers: *There are not, in the whole vast Library, two identical books.* From all these incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves contain all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographic symbols (whose number, though vast, is not infinite); that is, everything which can be expressed, in all languages. Everything is there: the minute history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, a demonstration of the fallacy of these catalogues, a demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on this gospel, the commentary on the commentary of this gospel, the veridical account of your death, a version of each book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.

When it was proclaimed that the Library comprised all books, the first impression was one of extravagant joy. All men felt themselves lords of a secret, intact treasure. There was no personal or universal problem whose eloquent solution did not exist—in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly expanded to the limitless dimensions of hope. At that time there was much talk of the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy, which vindicated for all time the actions of every man in the world and established a store of prodigious arcana for the future. Thousands of covetous persons abandoned their dear natal hexagons and crowded up the stairs, urged on by the vain aim of finding their Vindication. These pilgrims disputed in the narrow corridors, hurled dark maledictions, strangled each other on the divine stairways, flung the deceitful books to the bottom of die tunnels, and died as they were thrown into space by men from remote regions. Some went mad....

The Vindications do exist. I have myself seen two of these books, which were concerned with future people, people who were perhaps not imaginary. But the searchers did not remember that the calculable possibility of a man's finding his own book, or some perfidious variation of his own book, is close to zero.

The clarification of the basic mysteries of humanity—the origin of the Library and of time—was also expected. It is credible that those grave mysteries can be explained in words: if the language of the philosophers does not suffice, the multiform Library will have produced the unexpected language required and the necessary vocabularies and grammars for this language.

It is now four centuries since men have been wearying the hexagons....

There are official searchers, *inquisitors*.

I have observed them carrying out their functions: they are always exhausted. They speak of a staircase without steps where they were almost killed. They speak of galleries and stairs with the local librarian. From time to time they will pick up the nearest book and leaf through its pages, in search of infamous words. Obviously, no one expects to discover anything.

The uncommon hope was followed, naturally enough, by deep depression. The certainty that some shelf in some hexagon contained precious books and that these books were inaccessible seemed almost intolerable. A blasphemous sect suggested that all searches be given up and that men everywhere shuffle letters and symbols until they succeeded in composing, by means of an improbable stroke of luck, the canonical books. The authorities found themselves obliged to issue severe

orders. The sect disappeared, but in my childhood I still saw old men who would hide out in the privies for long periods of time, and, with metal discs in a forbidden dicebox, feebly mimic the divine disorder.

Other men, inversely, thought that the primary task was to eliminate useless works. They would invade the hexagons, exhibiting credentials which were not always false, skim through a volume with annoyance, and then condemn entire bookshelves to destruction: their ascetic, hygienic fury is responsible for the senseless loss of millions of books. Their name is execrated; but those who mourn the "treasures" destroyed by this frenzy, overlook two notorious facts. One: the Library is so enormous that any reduction undertaken by humans is infinitesimal. Two: each book is unique, irreplaceable, but (inasmuch as the Library is total) there are always several hundreds of thousands of imperfect facsimiles—of works which differ only by one letter or one comma. Contrary to public opinion, I dare suppose that the consequences of the depredations committed by the Purifiers have been exaggerated by the horror which these fanatics provoked. They were spurred by the delirium of storming the books in the Crimson Hexagon: books of a smaller than ordinary format, omnipotent, illustrated, magical.

We know, too, of another superstition of that time: the Man of the Book. In some shelf of some hexagon, men reasoned, there must exist a book which is the cipher and perfect compendium of *all the rest-*, some librarian has perused it, and it is analogous to a god. Vestiges of the worship of that remote functionary still persist in the language of this zone. Many pilgrimages have sought Him out. For a century they trod the most diverse routes in vain. How to locate the secret hexagon which harboured it? Someone proposed a regressive approach: in order to locate book A, first consult book B which will indicate the location of A; in order to locate book B, first consult book C, and so on *ad infinitum*....

I have squandered and consumed my years in adventures of this type. To me, it does not seem unlikely that on some shelf of the universe there lies a total book. I pray the unknown gods that some man—even if only one man, and though it have been thousands of years ago!—may have examined and read it. If honour and wisdom and happiness are not for me, let them be for others. May heaven exist, though my place be in hell. Let me be outraged and annihilated, but may Thy enormous Library be justified, for one instant, in one being.

The impious assert that absurdities are the norm in the Library and that anything reasonable (even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They

speak (I know) of “the febrile Library, whose hazardous volumes run the constant risk of being changed into others and in which everything is affirmed, denied, and confused as by a divinity in delirium.”

These words, which not only denounce disorder but exemplify it as well, manifestly demonstrate the bad taste of the speakers and their desperate ignorance. Actually, the Library includes all verbal structures, all the variations allowed by the twenty-five orthographic symbols, but it does not permit of one absolute absurdity. It is pointless to observe that the best book in the numerous hexagons under my administration is entitled *Combed Clap of Thunder;* or that another is called *The Plaster Cramp;* and still another *Axaxaxas Mlö.* Such propositions as are contained in these titles, at first sight incoherent, doubtless yield a cryptographic or allegorical justification. Since they are verbal, these justifications already figure, *ex hypothesi,* in the Library. I cannot combine certain letters, as *dhcmrlchtdj,* which the divine Library has not already foreseen in combination, and which in one of its secret languages does not encompass some terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not full of tenderness and fear, and which is not, in one of those languages, the powerful name of some god. To speak is to fall into tautologies. This useless and wordy epistle itself already exists in one of the thirty

volumes of the five shelves in one of the uncountable hexagons—and so does its refutation. (An *n* number of possible languages makes use of the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol *library* admits of the correct definition *ubiquitous and everlasting system of hexagonal galleries,* but *library* is *bread* or *pyramid* or anything else, and the seven words which define it possess another value. You who read me, are you sure you understand my language?)

Methodical writing distracts me from the present condition of men. But the certainty that everything has been already written nullifies or makes phantoms of us all. I know of districts where the youth prostrate themselves before books and barbarously kiss the pages, though they do not know how to make out a single letter. Epidemics, heretical disagreements, the pilgrimages which inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned the suicides, more frequent each year. Perhaps I am deceived by old age and fear, but I suspect that the human species —the unique human species— is on the road to extinction, while the Library will last on forever: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly immovable, filled with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret.

Infinite I have just written. I have not interpolated this adjective merely from rhetorical habit. It is not illogical, I

say, to think that the world is infinite. Those who judge it to be limited, postulate that in remote places the corridors and stairs and hexagons could inconceivably cease—a manifest absurdity. Those who imagined it to be limitless forget that the possible number of books is limited. I dare insinuate the following solution to this ancient problem: *The Library is limitless and periodic.* If an eternal voyager were to traverse it in any direction, he would find, after many centuries, that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder (which, repeated, would constitute an order: Order itself). My solitude rejoices in this elegant hope. [4]

NOTES

The original manuscript of the present note does not contain digits or capital letters. The punctuation is limited to the comma and the period. These two signs, plus the space sign and the twenty- two letters of the alphabet, make up the twenty- five sufficient symbols enumerated by the unknown author.

[2] *Formerly, for each three hexagons there was one man. Suicide and pulmonary diseases have destroyed this proportion. My memory recalls scenes of unspeakable melancholy: there have*

been many nights when I have ventured down corridors and polished staircases without encountering a single librarian.

[3] *I repeat: it is enough that a book be possible for it to exist. Only the impossible is excluded. For example: no book is also a stairway, though doubtless there are books that discuss and deny and demonstrate this possibility and others whose structure corresponds to that of a stairway.*

[4] *Letizia Alvarez de Toledo has observed that the vast Library is useless. Strictly speaking, one single volume should suffice: a single volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten type body, and consisting of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages. (At the beginning of the 17th century, Cavalieri said that any solid body is the superposition of an infinite number of planes.) This silky vade-mecum would scarcely be handy: each apparent leaf of the book would divide into other analogous leaves. The inconceivable central leaf would have no reverse.*

THE BABYLONIAN LOTTERY

Like everyone in Babylonia, I have been a proconsul, and like everyone a slave; I have known omnipotence, opprobrium and imprisonment. Look; the first finger of my right hand is missing. Look; through this rent in my cloak you can see a scarlet tattoo- mark on my stomach. It is the second sign, Beth. On nights when the moon is full, that letter gives me power over those men whose sign is Ghimel, but it subjects me to those with Aleph, who on moonless nights owe obedience to those with Ghimel. In the dawn twilight I have throttled the sacred bulls, in a cellar, before a black stone. For a whole lunar year I have been pronounced invisible. When I cried out no one answered, I stole bread and they did not behead me. I have known uncertainty: a state unknown to the Greeks. In a bronze room, before the silent handkerchief of the strangler, hope has not departed from me; in a stream of pleasures panic has not departed. Heraclides Ponticus reports with astonishment that Pythagoras remembered having once been Pyrrhus, and before that

Euphorbus, and before that some other person; to recall similar vicissitudes, I have no need to call in death, or to resort to imposture.

This almost appalling variety I owe to an institution that is unknown in other states, or that works there in an imperfect or secretive manner: the lottery. I have never traced its history; I know that the magi cannot agree about it; I know no more about it than a man unskilled in astrology can know about the moon. I belong to a crazy country in which the lottery is an essential part of reality; till to-day, I had never given it any more thought than to the behaviour of the inscrutable gods or of my own heart. Now, far away from Babylonia and its beloved customs, I reflect on the lottery with some astonishment, and remember the blasphemous conjectures that veiled men mutter in the twilight.

My father used to say that in olden days —was it centuries ago, or years?—the lottery in Babylonia was a game of the plebeian sort. He used to say (I do not know whether he was right) that barbers used to sell for a copper coin squares made of bone or parchment and inscribed with symbols. Then there used to be a draw in full daylight; and the winners received, without further resort to chance, some coins struck in silver. The procedure was rudimentary, as you see.

Of course these “lotteries” failed. Their moral value was nil. They were not directed at the whole of man’s faculties, only at his hopes. Faced with the public’s lack of interest, the merchants who started these trivial lotteries began to lose money. Someone tried to improve them; a few unlucky chances were inserted among the crowd of lucky numbers. By this improvement, buyers of numbered squares ran the double chance of winning some money or paying a fine that was sometimes quite large. This slight risk (there was only one unlucky number for each thirty that were lucky) naturally aroused the public interest. The Babylonians gave themselves up to the game. The man who did not buy lots was considered a spiritless coward. In time this justifiable contempt found a second object. Not only the man who did not play, but also the loser who paid his fine was despised. The Company (as people then began to call it) then had to watch the winners’ interest, for the prizes could not be given if almost the complete revenue from penalties failed to reach their coffers. It started a lawsuit against the losers, and the judge sentenced them either to pay the original fine and the costs or to spend some days in prison. In order to defraud the Company, all opted for prison. From this defiance by a few men the absolute power, the ecclesiastical and metaphysical force of the Company, originates.

A little later, the lottery lists ceased to mention the fines, and confined themselves to announcing the number of days' imprisonment carried by each unlucky number. This omission, which was almost unnoticed at the time, was of capital importance. *It marked the first appearance in the lottery of a non-pecuniary element.* The results were great. Under pressure from the players, the Company found itself compelled to increase the number of unlucky lots.

Everyone knows that the Babylonian people are deeply devoted to logic, and also to symmetry. It was inconsistent that the lucky numbers should be reckoned in round sums of money and the unlucky in days and nights in prison. Some moralists argued that the possession of money did not always bring happiness, and that other kinds of good- fortune are perhaps more efficacious.

A different dissatisfaction spread through the poorer districts. Members of the sacerdotal college bought a number of chances, and enjoyed every vicissitude of fear and hope. The poor (reasonably or unavoidably envious) found themselves debarred from these risks, which were well-known to be delightful. The just desire that all, poor and rich alike, should participate equally in the lottery aroused an indignant agitadon, the memory of which has not been effaced by the years. Some stubborn people did

not understand (or pretended not to understand) that they were dealing with a new order of things, a necessary historical advance. A slave stole a crimson ticket, which in the draw carried the penalty that his tongue must be burned. But the law awarded the same penalty to anyone who stole a ticket. Some Babylonians argued that he deserved the red- hot iron on account of the theft; others who were more generous said that the executioner should burn his tongue in fulfilment of the lot he had drawn. There were riots and, most lamentably, there was bloodshed. But the Babylonian people finally imposed their will in face of opposition from the rich. They obtained the whole of their generous demands. Firstly, they succeeded in making the Company assume sole plenary powers. (This unification was necessary on account of the vastness and complexity of the new operations.) Secondly, they succeeded in making the lottery secret, free and universal. The sale of tickets for money was abolished. Once he was initiated in the mysteries of Bel, every free man automatically took part in the sacred lotteries, which were drawn every sixty nights in the labyrinths of the god, and which decided his fate until the next draw. The consequences were incalculable. A lucky draw could secure a man's promotion to the council of the magi or the imprisonment of an enemy (public or private), or a meeting, in the peaceful darkness of a bedroom, with the

woman who is beginning to disturb us or whom we did not expect to see again; and an unlucky draw could bring mutilation, various kinds of disgrace, or death. Sometimes a single act—the assassination of C in a tavern, or the mysterious apotheosis of B—was the fortunate outcome of thirty or forty draws. This combination of chances was difficult. But it must be remembered that the members of the Company were (and are) both all-powerful and astute. In many cases, the knowledge that certain pleasures were merely the outcome of chance might have diminished their virtue; to obviate this difficulty the agents of the Company resorted to suggestion and to magic. Their methods and manoeuvres were secret. To discover the secret hopes and hidden terrors of each person, they made use of astrologers and spies. There were certain stone lions, there was a sacred latrine called Qaphqa, there were certain clefts in a dusty aqueduct which, according to popular belief, *led to the Company,* well-wishers or ill-wishers left their reports in these places. This information, which was of variable authenticity, was preserved in an alphabetical file.

Strange though it may seem, there was no lack of complaints. The Company, with its habitual discretion, did not answer them directly. It preferred to scribble on the ruined walls of a mask-factory a short argument, that

has now been incorporated in the holy scriptures. This doctrinal statement observed that the lottery marks the interference of chance in the world-order, and that the acceptance of errors did not invalidate, but, on the other hand, increased its power. It observed furthermore that those lions and the sacred receptacle, although not disowned by the Company (which did not renounce its right to consult them) functioned without official guarantee.

This declaration dispelled the public unrest, but also produced other results, perhaps unforeseen by its author. It profoundly modified the spirit and the activities of the Company. I have not much time left; we have been warned that our ship is about to sail. But I will try to explain.

Incredible though it may seem, no one had so far tried to discover any general theory of probability. Babylonians are not much given to speculation. They respect the decisions of chance, entrust their lives, their hopes, their panic fears to them, but they never think of investigating their labyrinthine laws, or the revolving spheres that reveal them. Nevertheless the official pronouncement that I have noted aroused many discussions of a judicio-mathematical character, one of which produced the following proposition: if the lottery represents an intensification of chance, an occasional

infusion of chaos into the cosmos, would it not be proper for chance to operate at every stage of the draw, and not at one alone? Is it not absurd that chance should decree a man's death, and that the circumstances of that death—confiscation of property, publicity, delay of an hour or a century—should not be subject to chance? These very reasonable misgivings finally produced a considerable reform, the complexities of which (intensified by centuries of usage) are only understood by a few specialists. I will nevertheless attempt to give a brief account of them if only in symbolical form.

Let us imagine a first draw, which decrees that a man shall die. To complete this, a second draw takes place, which decides among (let us say) nine possible corollaries. Of these corollaries four may lead to a third draw which will decide the name of the executioner, two may substitute for the fatal decree a happy one (the discovery of a treasure, let us say), another may aggravate the penalty (that is to say, make the death a disgraceful one or embellish it with tortures), and others may forbid its fulfilment.. .. This the symbolic scheme. In reality *the numbers of draws is infinite.* No decision is final, all lead on to a number of others. The ignorant suppose that infinite draws require infinite time; in reality all that is necessary is that time shall be infinitely divisible, as we learn from the famous parable of the race with the Tortoise. This

infinity is surprisingly congruous with the numerical convolutions of chance and with the Celestial Archetype of the Lottery, worshipped by the Platonists. Some distorted echo of our rites seems to have reached the Tiber. Aelius Lampridius, in his life of Antoninus Heliogabalus, mentions that this emperor used to write on shells the luck he reserved for his guests, so that one would receive ten golden pounds, and another ten flies, ten dormice or ten bears. It is worth recalling that Heliogabalus was educated in Asia Minor, among the priests of the god whose name he bore.

There are also impersonal lots, of indefinite application: one ordains that a Taprobana sapphire shall be thrown into the Euphrates; another that a bird shall be released from the roof of a tower; another that every century an ounce of sand shall be subtracted from (or added to) the innumerable quantity on the beach. The consequences are at times terrible.

Thanks to the beneficent influence of the Company, our customs are permeated by chance. The buyer of a dozen jars of Damascus wine will not be surprised if one of them contains a charm or a viper; the scribe who draws up a document seldom fails to introduce some faulty detail; I myself, in this hurried statement have falsified a splendour here and a horror there. Perhaps also, some mysterious ennui.... Our historians, who are

the most clear-sighted in the world, have invented a method of rectifying chance; the working of this method is well-known to be (generally) trustworthy, though, of course, it cannot be divulged without some measure of falsehood. In any case, there is nothing so contaminated by fiction as the history of the Company.... A palaeographic document, dug up in a temple, may be the product of yesterday's draw, or of one centuries ago. No book is published without some difference between every copy. The scribes swear a secret oath always to omit, interpolate or vary something. The indirect lie is also practised.

The Company, with divine modesty, avoids all publicity. Its agents, as is natural, are secret; the orders it is continually (perhaps incessantly) giving do not differ from those promulgated by impostors. Moreover, who can boast that he is a true impostor? The drunkard who invents a ridiculous order, the dreamer who suddenly wakes and throttles the wife who is sleeping beside him, are they not perhaps carrying out a secret decision of the Company? Its silent functioning, comparable to that of God, arouses all kinds of conjectures. One abominable suggestion is that for centuries the Company has not existed, and that the sacred confusion in our lives is purely hereditary and traditional; another says that it is eternal and will endure till the last night, when the last

god obliterates the world; another proclaims that the Company is omnipotent, but that it is only influential in tiny things, like a bird's cry, or the colour of rust or dust, or half-dreams at dawn. Another, speaking with the mouth of the masked hieresiarchs, says *that it has never existed and never will exist.* Another, just as base, argues that it does not matter whether you assert or deny the existence of this shadowy corporation, for Babylonia is nothing but an infinite game of chance.

THE CIRCULAR RUINS

And if he left off dreaming about you...

— THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, VI.

No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sink into the sacred mud, but in a few days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man came from the South and that his home had been one of those numberless villages upstream in the deeply cleft side of the mountain, where the Zend language has not been contaminated by Greek and where leprosy is infrequent. What is certain is that the grey man kissed the mud, climbed up the bank without pushing aside (probably, without feeling) the blades which were lacerating his flesh, and crawled, nauseated and bloodstained, up to the circular enclosure crowned with a stone tiger or horse, which sometimes was the colour of flame and now was that of ashes. This circle was a temple which had been devoured by ancient fires, profaned by the miasmal jungle, and whose god no longer received

the homage of men. The stranger stretched himself out beneath the pedestal. He was awakened by the sun high overhead. He was not astonished to find that his wounds had healed; he closed his pallid eyes and slept, not through weakness of flesh but through determination of will. He knew that this temple was the place required for his invincible intent; he knew that the incessant trees had not succeeded in strangling the ruins of another propitious temple downstream which had once belonged to gods now burned and dead; he knew that his immediate obligation was to dream. Towards midnight he was awakened by the inconsolable shriek of a bird. Tracks of bare feet, some figs and a jug warned him that the men of the region had been spying respectfully on his sleep, soliciting his protection or afraid of his magic. He felt a chill of fear, and sought out a sepulchral niche in the dilapidated wall where he concealed himself among unfamiliar leaves.

The purpose which guided him was not impossible, though supernatural. He wanted to dream a man; he wanted to dream him in minute entirety and impose him on reality. This magic project had exhausted the entire expanse of his mind; if someone had asked him his name or to relate some event of his former life, he would not have been able to give an answer. This uninhabited, ruined temple suited him, for it contained a minimum of

visible world; the proximity of the workmen also suited him, for they took it upon themselves to provide for his frugal needs. The rice and fruit they brought him were nourishment enough for his body, which was consecrated to the sole task of sleeping and dreaming.

At first, his dreams were chaotic; then in a short while they became dialectic in nature. The stranger dreamed that he was in the centre of a circular amphitheatre which was more or less the burnt temple; clouds of taciturn students filled the tiers of seats; the faces of the farthest ones hung at a distance of many centuries and as high as the stars, but their features were completely precise. The man lectured his pupils on anatomy, cosmography, and magic: the faces listened anxiously and tried to answer understandingly, as if they guessed the importance of that examination which would redeem one of them from his condition of empty illusion and interpolate him into the real world. Asleep or awake, the man thought over the answers of his phantoms, did not allow himself to be deceived by impostors, and in certain perplexities he sensed a growing intelligence. He was seeking a soul worthy of participating in the universe.

After nine or ten nights he understood with a certain bitterness that he could expect nothing from those pupils who accepted his doctrine passively, but that he could expect something from those who occasionally dared to

oppose him. The former group, although worthy of love and affection, could not ascend to the level of individuals; the latter pre-existed to a slightly greater degree. One afternoon (now afternoons were also given over to sleep, now he was only awake for a couple of hours at daybreak) he dismissed the vast illusory student body for good and kept only one pupil. He was a taciturn, sallow boy, at times intractable, and whose sharp features resembled those of his dreamer. The brusque elimination of his fellow students did not disconcert him for long; after a few private lessons, his progress was enough to astound the teacher. Nevertheless, a catastrophe took place. One day, the man emerged from his sleep as if from a viscous desert, looked at the useless afternoon light which he immediately confused with the dawn, and understood that he had not dreamed. All that night and all day long, the intolerable lucidity of insomnia fell upon him. He tried exploring the forest, to lose his strength; among the hemlock he barely succeeded in experiencing several short snatches of sleep, veined with fleeting, rudimentary visions that were useless. He tried to assemble the student body but scarcely had he articulated a few brief words of exhortation when it became deformed and was then erased. In his almost perpetual vigil, tears of anger burned his old eyes.

He understood that modelling the incoherent and vertiginous matter of which dreams are composed was the most difficult task that a man could undertake, even though he should penetrate all the enigmas of a superior and inferior order; much more difficult than weaving a rope out of sand or coining the faceless wind. He swore he would forget the enormous hallucination which had thrown him off at first, and he sought another method of work. Before putting it into execution, he spent a month recovering his strength, which had been squandered by his delirium. He abandoned all premeditation of dreaming and almost immediately succeeded in sleeping a reasonable part of each day. The few times that he had dreams during this period, he paid no attention to them. Before resuming his task, he waited until the moon's disc was perfect. Then, in the afternoon, he purified himself in the waters of the river, worshipped the planetary gods, pronounced the prescribed syllables of a mighty name, and went to sleep. He dreamed almost immediately, with his heart throbbing.

He dreamed that it was warm, secret, about the size of a clenched fist, and of a garnet colour within the penumbra of a human body as yet without face or sex; during fourteen lucid nights he dreamt of it with meticulous love. Every night he perceived it more clearly. He did not touch it; he only permitted himself to witness it, to

observe it, and occasionally to rectify it with a glance. He perceived it and lived it from all angles and distances. On the fourteenth night he lightly touched the pulmonary artery with his index finger, then the whole heart, outside and inside. He was satisfied with the examination. He deliberately did not dream for a night; he then took up the heart again, invoked the name of a planet, and undertook the vision of another of the principal organs. Within a year he had come to the skeleton and the eyelids. The innumerable hair was perhaps the most difficult task. He dreamed an entire man—a young man, but who did not sit up or talk, who was unable to open his eyes. Night after night, the man dreamt him asleep.

In the Gnostic cosmogonies, demiurges fashion a red Adam who cannot stand; as clumsy, crude, and elemental as this Adam of dust was the Adam of dreams forged by the wizard's nights. One afternoon, the man almost destroyed his entire work, but then changed his mind. (It would have been better had he destroyed it.) When he had exhausted all supplications to the deities of the earth, he threw himself at the feet of the effigy which was perhaps a tiger or perhaps a colt and implored its unknown help. That evening, at twilight, he dreamt of the statue. He dreamt it was alive, tremulous: it was not an atrocious bastard of a tiger and a colt, but at the same time these two fiery creatures and also a bull, a rose, and

a storm. This multiple god revealed to him that his earthly name was Fire, and that in this circular temple (and in others like it) people had once made sacrifices to him and worshipped him, and that he would magically animate the dreamed phantom, in such a way that all creatures, except Fire itself and the dreamer, would believe it to be a man of flesh and blood. He commanded that once this man had been instructed in all the rites, he should be sent to the other ruined temple whose pyramids were still standing downstream, so that some voice would glorify him in that deserted edifice. In the dream of the man that dreamed, the dreamed one awoke.

The wizard carried out the orders he had been given. He devoted a certain length of time (which finally proved to be two years) to instructing him in the mysteries of the universe and the cult of fire. Secretly, he was pained at the idea of being separated from him. On the pretext of pedagogical necessity, each day he increased the number of hours dedicated to dreaming. He also remade the right shoulder, which was somewhat defective. At times, he was disturbed by the impression that all this had already happened....In general, his days were happy; when he closed his eyes, he thought: *Now **I** will be with my son.* Or, more rarely: *The son **I** have engendered is waiting for me and will not exist if I do not go to him.*

Gradually, he began accustoming him to reality. Once he ordered him to place a flag on a faraway peak. The next day the flag was fluttering on the peak. He tried other analogous experiments, each time more audacious. With a certain bitterness, he understood that his son was ready to be born —and perhaps impatient. That night he kissed him for the first time and sent him off to the other temple whose remains were turning white downstream, across many miles of inextricable jungle and marshes. Before doing this (and so that his son should never know that he was a phantom, so that he should think himself a man like any other) he destroyed in him all memory of his years of apprenticeship.

His victory and peace became blurred with boredom. In the twilight times of dusk and dawn, he would prostrate himself before the stone figure, perhaps imagining his unreal son carrying out identical rites in other circular ruins downstream; at night he no longer dreamed, or dreamed as any man does. His perceptions of the sounds and forms of the universe became somewhat pallid: his absent son was being nourished by these diminutions of his soul. The purpose of his life had been fulfilled; the man remained in a kind of ecstasy. After a certain time, which some chroniclers prefer to compute in years and others in decades, two oarsmen awoke him at midnight; he could not see their faces, but

they spoke to him of a charmed man in a temple of the North, capable of walking on fire without burning himself. The wizard suddenly remembered the words of the god. He remembered that of all the creatures that people the earth, Fire was the only one who knew his son to be a phantom. This memory, which at first calmed him, ended by tormenting him. He feared lest his son should meditate on this abnormal privilege and by some means find out he was a mere simulacrum. Not to be a man, to be a projection of another man's dreams—what an incomparable humiliation, what madness! Any father is interested in the sons he has procreated (or permitted) out of the mere confusion of happiness; it was natural that the wizard should fear for the future of that son whom he had thought out entrail by entrail, feature by feature, in a thousand and one secret nights.

His misgivings ended abruptly, but not without certain forewarnings. First (after a long drought) a remote cloud, as light as a bird, appeared on a hill; then, towards the South, the sky took on the rose colour of leopards' gums; then came clouds of smoke which rusted the metal of the nights; afterwards came the panic-stricken flight of wild animals. For what had happened many centuries before was repeating itself. The ruins of the sanctuary of the god of Fire was destroyed by fire. In a dawn without birds, the wizard saw the concentric fire licking the walls. For a

moment, he thought of taking refuge in the water, but then he understood that death was coming to crown his old age and absolve him from his labours. He walked towards the sheets of flame. They did not bite his flesh, they caressed him and flooded him without heat or combustion. With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.

THE CARD-TRICK (VERSE)

Fifty-two cards have taken the place of life.
Fifty-two amulets of painted cardboard
have gently conspired to replace
the great primordial reality
of sufferings and pleasures of the flesh,
and this smiling new creation
goes to work peopling the stolen time
with all the dazzling primitive deceptions
of its tyrannical mythology.
Along the edges of the card-table,
life stops short. Within is another country—
all the excitement of bidding and of wishing,
the ace of spades, powerful as Don Juan Manuel,
the seven of diamonds jingling our hopes.
A lazy slowness settles on all talk,

old words go slithering down the well-known slopes
and, like the ups and downs of the game itself,
are everlastingly the same. The players
in the immediate fever of the moment
take some unlikely tricks—an accomplishment
which lends a touch of immortality
(though scarcely more than a touch)
to all their dead companions in the silence.

translated by Alastair Reid

A PATIO (VERSE)

So with afternoon
the two or three colours of the patio grew weary.
The great friendliness of the full moon
no longer inspires the usual firmament.
Today the sky is sharp and will tell
of an augury announcing the death of an angel.
Patio, directed sky and dome.
The patio is the window
through which God watches souls.
The patio is the slope
on which heavens scatter on home.
Serene
eternity waits at the crossroads of stars.
How beautiful to live in humble friendship
with eaves, a porch and a well.

Jorge Luis Borges

SOURCES

The Duration of Hell aka La Duración del Infierno, Lunes de Revolución nr. 24 (31 August 1959)

The Rejected Sorcerer aka El Brujo Postergado, Fantastic Universe, March 1960

The Library of Babel, “Encounter Magazine”, July 1962

The Babylonian Lottery, “Encounter Magazine”, June 1962

The Circular Ruins, “Encounter Magazine”, July 1962

The Card-Trick, “Encounter Magazine”, March 1963

A Patio, “Encounter Magazine”, January 1963